DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 126 EA 005 869

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TITLE New Directions in School Governance -- Who's in Charge?
PUB DATE 24 Feb 74
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at American Association of School Administrators Annual Convention (106th, Atlantic City, New Jersey, February 22-26, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Experiments; *Education Vouchers; Elementary Schools; *Parent Attitudes; *Pilot Projects; Speeches
IDENTIFIERS *Alum Rock School District; California; San Jose

ABSTRACT

Alum Rock School District, San Jose, California, is the only school district to participate in OEO's education voucher experiment. In this speech, the superintendent of that school district describes the district's experience with education vouchers. He describes the experiment design and discusses parental attitudes on the voucher experiment. (JF)

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
106th Annual Convention
Atlantic City, N. J. February 22-24, 1974

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TOPIC: NEW DIRECTIONS IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE—WHO'S IN CHARGE?

PLACE: Room 19, Convention Hall

TIME: Sunday, February 24, 1974 2:30 P. M.

PROGRAM: Page 49

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Alum Rock Demographic and Financial Data

The Alum Rock Union School District serves the student population of the eastern portion of San Jose, California. Known locally as the "east valley," the area has rapidly urbanized during the past 15 years. Even now, some sections of the district are making the complex transition from agricultural to residential and commercial land use. Fruit orchards are quickly being replaced by low - and moderate-income housing developments and garden apartment complexes. There remains little distinction between downtown and residential area; retail stores and shopping centers are distributed throughout residential neighborhoods. Although half the district's children are considered poor by both Federal and state standards, poor families are not concentrated in particular areas. In fact, San Jose is the most fully integrated Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area in the nation.

The Alum Rock Union School District is administered by a five member elected school board, serving staggered four year terms. Board membership mirrors the community's cultural and racial diversity, including: one Chicano; one Japanese-American; one black, and a male and female white. The board has independent taxing authority and appoints the superintendent.

In 1969-70, Alum Rock received one-third more state aid per pupil than California's average student aid. Only 30 of California's 723 elementary school districts had a higher total tax rate; the state median assessed valuation per elementary pupil was $19,600 and Alum Rock's was $5,328 . According to its superintendent, Alum Rock is the "poorest" large district in Northern California, and one of the poorest large elementary districts in the entire state. Its student population usually has fluctuated between 15,000 and 16,000 students in grades kindergarten - eight. The current student population is about 50% Spanish-surnamed, 12% black, and 38% white and other.

Alum Rock' s operating budget increased from slightly under $11 million in 1969-70, to $13 million in 1971-72, and to $16 million in 1972-73. For the 1973-74 school year, the budget is over $18 million. This increase is largely due to new state aid programs.

More than half the students in Alum Rock schools participate in federally funded free or reduced price lunch programs, and according to the 1970 Census, 36% of district families receive public assistance. The population of Alum Rock is relatively mobile; consequently, pupil turnover runs as high as 30% a year.

The Voucher Project at Alum Rock

After carefully exploring the theoretical model, Alum Rock applied to OEO for a feasibil-

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ity grant in February 1971. The district had begun to decentralize some activities of the school district, and saw the voucher project as a means of achieving this objective rapidly. The voucher plan initially studied by Alum Rock included non-public schools, but the California legislature did not pass the necessary enabling legislation. Despite this set-back, interest in the voucher demonstration continued.

Community reaction to the plan based on survey feedback was generally positive. It was recognized that one source of resistance to the experiment among teachers and staff was their unfamiliarity with the staff role change which would accompany decentralization in a voucher operation. To explore this issue thoroughly, district retained organizational development and management training consultants to assist potential participants in assessing the personal and professional implications of a voucher project. The effort generated substantial support for a "modified voucher model," which would act as a transition between traditional school structures and the regulated compensatory voucher system.

Alum Rock ultimately requested funds for a public schools and 3,900 children in grades kindergarten through eight. While including the essential features of the voucher concept, the demonstration operated within the constraints of the existing education code and the California Constitution.

In short, the transition model was designed to encourage an adequate range of different public education programs from which parents can choose. OEO required each of the six schools to offer at least two distinct educational programs, or "mini-schools." Each "mini-school" has its own income-outgo budget, curriculum, educational philosophy and staff. Parents are able to enroll children in any "mini-school" in any participating school building.

Principals and faculty members agreed that program differentiation within a school provided an environment in which administrators and teachers alike could maximize their professional capabilities, and in many cases, this increased communications between faculty and parents. In turn, these dialogues led to academic programs which reflected parents' wishes and teachers' professional interests. By May 1972, twenty-two "mini-schools" housed in the six buildings were offered. These programs can be categorized broadly as follows: Traditional Academic--each school developed at least on traditional "mini-school" in response to parents' insistence on educational continuity Innovative or Open Classrooms; Gifted; Fine and Creative Arts; Learning-by Doing: Individualized Learning, and Multi-Cultural. Each "mini-school" was required to prepare information about its program offering, educational philosophy, student-teacher ratio and extent of parent participation. This information was verified and distributed to participating parents before their enrollment selections were made.

An independent and representative group drawn from the demonstration area, the Education Voucher Advisory Committee (EVAC), advised the school board on matters affecting the demonstration. Groups of parents or others wishing to initiate programs not available within demonstration schools were permitted to develop programs responsible to the school board through individual contracts which would operate under the rules governing other voucher schools.

In March 1973, after seven months of operation, Alum Rock proposed a major expansion for the 1973-74 academic year, adding approximately 5,000 students in seven additional schools. During the Spring 1973 enrollment period for school attendance in the coming Fall, parents could choose among more than forty "mini-school" programs in thirteen public school buildings.

Three important features of both the transition and full voucher models should be mentioned here--compensatory vouchers, lottery placement, and optional purchase of central services.

In keeping with the consensus of the education community and with strong precedent (Title I, ESEA, etc.) a "compensatory voucher" is given to eligible children to be used at the discretion of the "mini-school" faculties. This attempts to equalize the schools' responsiveness to parents by providing extra funds to programs that attract economically disadvantaged students. In 1973-74, this voucher will amount to $275.

Certain central services (psychologists, audio-visual services, and curriculum support services) are now "decentralized." Previously, the district office provided these services centrally to all district schools. Now voucher schools receive these funds for their individual use. This procedure increases each program manager's freedom to expend income as he deems appropriate.

Research and Analysis to Date

The voucher demonstration is producing extensive changes in school organization, management, and the traditional relationships among staff, faculty and parents. These and other factors have let to an exploratory and experimental approach to the analysis of project data.

It is important to emphasize that the changes in Alum Rock during the 1972-73 school year do not constitute an adequate basis for conclusions about the effectiveness of the voucher concept in general. The intial year, for both the school district and the Federal government, has been primarily developmental; and full understanding of the voucher system is not expected until well into the program period.

Evaluation activities in Alum Rock began in Spring 1972 shortly after the Board of Education submitted its first year proposal to OEO. Since then data collection instruments have been designed and field tested, baseline data on students, parents and teachers have been collected, observations of the schools and the community have been made, and with the close of the first year of the demonstration, preliminary analyses have begun.

Parental Choice

Parental control and satisfaction are difficult to measure. However, when a parent transfers a child from one educational program to another, some sort of choice has been made. The voucher mechanism facilitated that choice, and this, the transfer of children from one participating school to another is a clear index of parental exercise of control.

In Alum Rock, transfers were permitted at any time during the school year, and without limit. During the first year of the demonstration, about 240 families of the 2,650 participating families transferred children. These transfers were in the following categories:

- 101 families enrolled children in different buildings than they had previously been attending.
- 27 families changed building during the school year.
- 95 families changed program within a building during the school year.

Over 40% of the families with two or more children in voucher schools chose different programs for different offspring, implying a desire to match program styles to children's needs.

During the project's second year, the number of transfers is expected to increase

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significantly. The Spring 1973 enrollment cycle for the 1973-74 school year showed that:

- Among the original six voucher schools, 38% of the children transferred for the coming year, 30% changed from one program to another within the same school building, while 8% changed from one building to another.

- Among the new voucher schools, 17% of the students changed from the school building they were attending in school year 1972-73, to another participating voucher school for the coming school year.

Changes in Parental Attitudes

Voucher parents were surveyed in Fall 1972 and again in June 1973. A brief description of the differences in their responses follows. Perhaps the most significant increases between the surveys occurred in the percentage of participating parents agreeing with the following attitudinal statements:

- Most parents like the idea that they should have a choice about the kinds of schools their children attend. (Fall, 83%, Spring, 95%)

- Children will get a better education if their parents can select the school that they go to. (Fall 57%, Spring, 75%)

- Giving parents a choice about the schools their children attend will make teachers more responsive to their complaints and suggestions. (Fall, 66%, Spring, 76%)

Thus, it appears that, after a year's experience, parents more fully understand the role of parental choice in a voucher system. Furthermore, compared to the Fall, more parents believed that they should help decide on the hiring and firing of teachers (Fall, 36%, Spring, 53%) and principals (Fall, 52%, Spring, 69%)

- Compared to the Fall, more parents surveyed in the Spring believed that the voucher system will provide the means for greater control over their children's education. (Fall, 53%, Spring, 69%) They also believed that vouchers will improve the quality of the education their children receive. (Fall, 77%; Spring, 89%)

- In the Spring survey, more parents believed that teachers and principals took their suggestions and complaints seriously.

- In both Fall 1972 and Spring 1973, parents in Alum Rock were 20% more satisfied with their schools than a national sample of parents.

- In Spring 1973, almost one quarter of the parents believed that the number of program offerings by the school administration of Alum Rock was insufficient. The perceived benefits of the voucher system increased across the board. This is to say that in Spring 1973 more parents than in Fall 1972 perceived that the voucher system would benefit children from lower-income families, children from middle-income families, black children, white-Anglo children, Chicano or Mexican-American children, teachers, school administrators, and parents.

In summary parents have gained a better understanding of the role of choice in the voucher system, have increased their knowledge about vouchers, and have remained satisfied with the schools. At the same time they believe that the school system should offer more programs, which is somewhat contradictory to their belief that teachers and principals are responsive to their suggestions and complaints.

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